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Some Thoughts on the Provision
of Services for the Blind
in the Seventies

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PROVISION OF SERVICES
FOR THE BLIND IN THE SEVENTIES

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With more and more people having read and digested Seebohm; with an increasing awareness of the apparent impact of the implementation of Seebohm and other current pieces of relevant legislation; and after having spent the last eight years in close working contact with almost every aspect of the existing system of services for the blind in this country this seems a good moment to set down my personal views on the possible future of this service. I want to try and do this under a number of headings and in the hope that my comments may add a little to what is at present a constant topic of discussion.

My own interest in this topic is twofold. First, most of the work which we do here makes sense only if it leads to recommendations which can be implemented for the benefit of the blind users. Such implementation in turn depends very much on those who provide services for the blind. Secondly, and more generally, the future of the provision of services for the blind is a matter of public interest as one aspect of the country's Social Services.



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1. THE BLIND POPULATION

In a national population of something approaching sixty millions there are some 113,000 blind people. Of these rather more than 70,000 are over the age of 65 years. Of the rest, something over 10,000 are employable, about the same number are not fit enough to work for reasons other than blindness, and another 10,000 are 'not available for work'; not surprisingly it turns out that most of this group are women and one suspects that this particular group will be reduced in size and shifted to the first group in the coming years. There are some 2,000 children of whom about 1,200 are in schools for the blind. Every year some 11,000 people are newly registered as blind, again with a majority in middle or later life. Finally, and right across the board, blindness includes everything from total absence of sight to those who have just sufficient sight to read unaided the headlines in papers and who can obtain enjoyment from watching television.

Thus, to paraphrase Professor Sorsby, the blind population is largely an ageing group with severely impaired vision - by and large it is fairly widely and thinly dispersed all over the country.

This population is provided for by statutory and voluntary bodies - the former organised on a local government basis and under the auspices of welfare departments; the latter organised in a great variety of ways. Legislation provides for certain minimum services which are in essence supplemented and complemented by the voluntary bodies. Education and employment are in the first instance the responsibilities of the respective central and local government agencies and provide the classic examples of the working of the partnership between voluntary and statutory bodies.

It is not possible to say with any degree of precision just how well or how badly the blind population has been or is being served by this partnership since no independent data are available on this. Perhaps the fact that there has been no overall pressure for such data is in itself the best indication of satisfactory working. But it is not only those who examine the existing system from the outside, like the occasional reporter or television producer, who come up with praise as well as with criticism, but also those who receive and those who provide the services.

Whenever one looks at a system like that under consideration here, one asks first whether it is working as well as it was intended to work; and next whether the intended aim of the service is in fact a sufficient, or indeed the right aim. One can only hope that one of these days somebody will take a long, cool look at this particular system and come up with some harder facts than those on which I now propose to proceed. Let us grant that, given the resources in money and in manpower, the present system is working pretty well and almost certainly better than in most other countries: let us even grant that it is the best and be grateful for that.

And then let us consider the criticisms which are being raised, not in order to denigrate anybody, but in order to seek to improve the system. Most of that criticism can be reduced to a very few statements:

- (a) The flow, and the rate of flow, of information between clients and agencies is bad.
- (b) The flow of information within the agencies is bad.



- (c) The service is too diffuse and too sparse.
- (d) The service is too isolated from other comparable services.
- (e) The level of professionalism within the service is too low.
- (f) There is not enough opportunity for clients to participate in the decision making and planning stages of the service.

2. WELFARE AND REHABILITATION

I may well be wrong, and am open to correction on this point no less than on any others, but I do believe that the time has come to make the distinction between these two aspects of the service much more explicit. There is little doubt about the meaning and intent of rehabilitation: this is a part of any service to a handicapped population which seeks to bring the disabled person back to the same life as that which he led before disablement, or which he would have led if he had not been born with a disability. In theory, this part of the service should have all the characteristics of a short-term effort as far as the client is concerned. The whole ethos of the effort should be one of being able to withdraw the temporary support as quickly as possible and for the client to be able to forget the need for temporary support as quickly as possible. Rehabilitation in that sense is possible wherever the nature of the disability is such as to make it possible; either because the disability can be overcome by treatment or management, or else because a sufficiently wide segment of ordinary life remains accessible in spite of the disability incurred. In one way or another the question is whether blindness can be thought of as a disability for which rehabilitation in that sense is possible; or at least the question is for how many blind people does this apply?

Welfare, on the other hand, is much more difficult to define. But, to make the distinction, I would argue that it is that part of the service which seeks to make life more tolerable for those disabled people who can not be rehabilitated. Thus, straightaway, it becomes clear that this part of the service must, be a long-term effort, by definition, and have all the characteristics of this: once contact has been established with the client this contact will remain in existence in various ways for the rest of the client's life. The object of the exercise is to provide permanent support for the client and to make it possible for the client to benefit maximally from the permanency of the support. This, of course, brings us up against the paradox to be mentioned in the next section.

At present, I suspect that services for the blind are still pretty heavily dominated by a welfare approach. Purely numerically speaking there is of course every justification for the continuation of such an attitude, but I do rather wonder whether numbers are always everything. It is, I think, significant that the Beacon is still called the Official Journal of Blind Welfare, and may be there is a case for having some new thoughts on that small point.

I am almost certain that even at the level of welfare as defined above there is need for specialist services for the blind. I am absolutely certain that this is so when one comes to the the problem of rehabilitation. I shall try to make out the case for such needs under separate headings. For the moment let me suggest that there might be a case for the statutory side coping primarily with matters of welfare, and for the voluntary side to deal primarily with problems of rehabilitation under which heading I would here include all those services needed to cope with the onset of blindness whether at birth or later in life.

3. THE PARADOX OF PROVIDING SERVICES FOR THE BLIND

The blind, in common with any other group of handicapped people, do not like to be identified as a group by virtue of their handicap. Yet, in order to make the provision of services both humane and efficient, there must first be a measure of identification. Indeed, if we take the ultimate aim of the service as the full integration of the blind with the rest of the community we still have to begin by identifying and labelling those who need the service.

But, if we do take this ultimate aim seriously, it is also obvious that once blind people are starting to approach this aim - long before they actually reach it and some considerable time after they have been identified as blind - they will want to get rid of the identification and of anything which may remind them of it. The object of the exercise should of course be to help the largest possible number of clients to discard their labels.

This has one further consequence. On the one hand there is rightly and properly much clamour for participation by the blind in the running of the service. At the same time, almost anyone who 'is making the grade' in open employment in general and the professions in particular, is obviously not very enthusiastic about the continued involvement in the affairs of the blind. There is already a very considerable conflict building up here between two courses of action, both highly desirable: those who are making the grade should clearly be encouraged to take part in all sorts of everyday activities of the sighted community. Yet it is precisely this group which should also be encouraged to follow the great Dr. Armitage's example:-

"I cannot conceive any occupation so congenial to a blind man of education and leisure as the attempt to advance the education and improve the conditions of his fellow-sufferers."

Because it is this group which could help to accelerate the process of integration for those still in need of the provisions of the service. There is a very serious problem here which may need to be tackled much more explicitly in the near future. One possible solution might be found by attracting some of these people to a career in the corps of specialists referred to under 4 and 5 below.

Let it be noted here that it is a measure of the success of the existing services for the blind that the conflict discussed in the last paragraph exists for a sizable number of the blind population.

4. THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN STATUTORY AND VOLUNTARY BODIES

Fortunately we do not have to discuss whether this partnership is a good thing or not, or what the respective merits of a system run wholly by the state or wholly by local authorities, or wholly by voluntary bodies might be. For the foreseeable future the partnership is likely to be with us. I do not know the exact figures and it might be interesting for somebody to produce them; but I suspect that at present the voluntary side probably provides something between a half and a third of the total cost of everything that is being done in this country for blind people. Even if it were thought to be desirable to abolish the voluntary side- and there are weighty arguments for and against such a step - there is no reason to assume that government, either local or central, would be able to maintain the current standard of services provided - let alone that it would be eager to do so. Thus it seems sensible to accept the continued existence of this partnership and hope for continued support.

There are just two points though which need to be made explicit. On the one hand the current trend in the economic life of the country may well lead to a considerable reduction in the resources available to the voluntary side. On the other hand, the current trends in the social life of the country are well towards the State, rather than voluntary bodies, dealing with the needs of the handicapped population; and the concept of what is meant by 'meeting the needs' is broadening all the time. Thus there are strong forces at work against the continued existence of the voluntary side's effort based on charitable contributions and strong forces towards increasing the statutory effort based on the right of the individual to have minimum support from the State in time of need.

What is open for discussion is the future nature of the partnership, or the respective roles of the statutory and the voluntary bodies. At present there is not merely a considerable amount of variation in that relationship up and down the country, but also a measure of diffusion, overlap and ambiguity. This may of course be very desirable but it does seem worthwhile exploring alternatives which are in line with contemporary thought in other and analogous spheres of activity.

It seems to me that the current trend of a unified, family oriented social service does have a great deal to offer when applied to the blind population, but that it must be complemented by a highly professional corps of specialists. I would therefore put forward for discussion the proposition that it should be the task of the voluntary side to provide that corps, the services and supplies that are special to the blind. I shall argue in subsequent sections for the need for such specialist services and have already stated the case for the clearer distinction between welfare and rehabilitation.

If, for the sake of argument, one accepts this as the main future role for the voluntary side, one may want to go on to consider whether this should be a unified service administered by something like a National Corporation and financed by the pooled resources of the nation's voluntary bodies (if nothing else, this would make a lawyers' feast) or whether all existing voluntary bodies should continue to retain their present degree of autonomy. One would also want to consider how this specialist corps would be most sensibly integrated with the statutory side and one would want to look at various analogous systems and consider various possibilities. The Specialists could operate completely independently rather like the Blind Person's Officers of the DEP do at present, or they could be seconded to the statutory bodies on a contract basis.

But, and without going into the details of any of the following points here and now, if the role suggested above were to be the future function of the voluntary side, there would be all sorts of advantages and relatively few disadvantageous: the enormous wealth of specialist know-how possessed by the voluntary bodies would not merely be retained but could, I suspect, be utilised more efficiently than at present; for the officers of the new service there would be a clear and definite two-way flow of information and a career structure; for the clients there would be a specialist service dealing with the special needs of the blind population quickly, directly, and with a minimum delay. I can only see one disadvantage at the moment: the statutory side might find it difficult to cope with specialist services which might be outside their direct control: in almost every other case specialists are local government employees.

5. THE CASE FOR A SPECIALIST SERVICE

At one level the case for having specialists in blind welfare and rehabilitation can be argued quite simply: man is basically a visually dominated organism and almost everything he does has evolved on that assumption. Hence those who have little or no sight must avail themselves of fundamentally different means if they are to attain the same ends as the sighted. In this they need help, even if only temporarily, by people who have sympathy, understanding, and expert knowledge of the condition of blindness and the means available to come to terms with and overcome the consequences of the handicap. Whether these experts are sighted or blind probably matters less than that they are knowledgeable and that they have an opportunity to update their knowledge. I would argue that quite apart from a high level of initial training, it takes a good many years of experience to attain the required level of knowledge, and that in a field such as blindness, experience is in fact at a premium.

Whether one thinks of the service in terms of welfare or of rehabilitation (cf 2) it is in a very real sense a bridge between those without sight and the rest of the community. For the sighted members of such a service, because they are sighted, it is incredibly hard to understand even the world of the adventitiously blinded - and by definition it is almost impossible to understand the world of the congenitally blind. For the blind members of the service there are basic difficulties about understanding and/or keeping up to date with the rest of the community. If the service is to fulfill its function as a bridge there is a clear need for both blind and sighted people to join it; there is an equally clear need to keep them in this service; and there is finally the equally obvious need to attract the right calibre of person into the service in the first place.

All these needs could be met by a 'corps of specialists' with a recognised form of initial training; a sensible salary structure; and, above all, reasonable career prospects. I don't think anybody would really quibble about the first two items apart from those who might have to foot the bill. I therefore want to deal more specifically with the career structure. As matters stand at present there is to all intents and purposes no real career structure for those in the welfare and rehabilitation services. On the whole, anybody who wants to improve his or her position has to move outside the service. This has two bad consequences: first the best people are either discouraged from joining or almost all are inevitably lost to the service. Secondly, there is very little likelihood that the immediate superior of a hometeacher or a welfare officer has in fact had a long terms experience of the service's problems. In many ways it is the second point which is probably the more serious because in recent years it appears to have led to the increasing isolation of the very person who in law is the unique link between a blind person and the rest of the service.

Some old hands may well smile wryly at this comment and remember the old days when the home-teaching service was wholly in the hands of the voluntary side. If you like, I am advocating something like a return to the concept of that service, but I would argue for it to be placed quite firmly in the spirit of the second half of the twentieth century. The kind of service which I would like to see discussed and costed would be an integral part of contemporary welfare and rehabilitation services with its members having the status of specialists within that service. They would then be trained and equipped to deal with the problems associated with the onset of blindness whether at birth or in later life (i.e. an enlargement of the RNIB's present Parent Unit and the creation of a new Unit to deal with the onset of blindness in later life, a form of service which is sadly lacking at present at the non-residential level); with the problems associated with rehabilitation at both residential and non-residential levels (i.e. an enlargement of the existing Rehabilitation Centres as well as the staffing of non-residential centres for initial and

follow-up work); and with the special welfare problems beyond the scope of the welfare officer (i.e. the teaching of special skills required for purposes domestic and social, which would include communication).

I personally would argue for such a corps of specialists to be organised on a national basis, with higher grades drawn from the ranks of the service in the first instance. Above all, there should be a great easing of the flow of information within that service, to and from the clients, and to and from other agencies. At the very least this should help to deal with one of the major complaints about the present system, that it is very hard for a blind person to obtain adequate information quickly; and that it is almost as hard for a home-teacher or welfare officer. But it should also ensure that there is a better integration of effort and purpose all along the line, e.g. that those providing training at a residential centre can hand on to colleagues at the local level against a background of common knowledge and procedures.

The main practical (as distinct from emotional) argument against organisation on a national basis is of course that it does not allow for sufficient diversity of solutions - the present and existing system certainly does that. But diversity has little merit in it unless it can be shown to be communicated so that the results obtained in one place can be applied in another. Again, I would have thought that the numbers of clients were too small to make strictly local organisation of a specialist service truly efficient by contemporary standards. The British are great at arriving at compromises, so perhaps what one wants is organisation on some regional basis to allow for both efficiency and diversity.

Thus, the main argument for the need for a specialist service with regard to blindness is that as a disability it has certain unique aspects which it would be unreasonable as well as highly inefficient to be dealt with by a general purpose welfare officer.

6. THE GATHERING, DISSEMINATING AND EXCHANGING OF INFORMATION

It is the serious restriction in these three activities which is perhaps the most obvious and dramatic disabling effect of blindness. And it is probably the single most outstanding and unique feature of blindness which distinguishes it from almost every other disability. We come back to the basic fact of life that man is predominantly a visual organism and that most of the relevant information is gathered visually. It is not only the explicit and hard forms of information conveyed by books and newspapers, it is the information implicit in the changing scene; it is not only that there is a relative paucity of written material for the blind, but also that there is little diversity. It is not merely general information which is hard to come by for the blind, but worse still information which is or might be of particular relevance to them. It is in this sphere that the blind person's range of options can be seen to be more drastically curtailed than in almost any other sphere and it is here that with the application of contemporary management technique coupled with the resources of technology the most dramatic short-term improvement could be achieved. Until and unless it is achieved the effective participation by blind people in the decision-making and planning stages of service for the blind will be severely curtailed.

It must, therefore, be one of the first responsibilities of those providing services for the blind to ensure an adequate, fast, and diversified flow of information to the clients. It is equally important to ensure such a flow from clients to agencies and among agencies. At present I do not think that anybody would seriously disagree with me in reiterating the plain statement of fact that this flow of information is far from adequate, fast, and diversified. Much could be done on an interim basis here and now to enable, for instance social welfare officers for the blind to shortcircuit the present channels of communication when writing to each other or to people in other agencies on matters of information as distinct from action; at present a request may have to go up through the case worker and the chief welfare officer to, say, the Director-General of RNIB, to the head of a given department there until it reaches a particular expert in that organisation - and then all the way back.

But on a long term basis one would surely expect a new service, this corps of specialists, to have as one of its main functions the gathering, disseminating and exchanging of information. For as long as a blind person requires the service there should be one single person who can act as a quick access point to an efficient and centralised information system for that particular blind person. That centralised system, one would hope, would be set up in such a way that it would gather information not merely on demand, but also and markedly at its own initiative. One might also well want to consider whether blind people could have direct access to those who staff such an information system and whether subject matter experts within the information system could be directly accessible.

One wants to consider also the relationship between the information system and the action system of any future service. At present one is under the impression that the same sort of channels are being used for these two functions, and what is more, that the action side of the service sometimes appears to inhibit the information side. Clearly there must be points of contact between the two systems, but equally clearly they need not be wholly or even partially overlapping.

Whatever may be evolved in the future, I do not think that there can be any doubt about the very special responsibility of those providing services for the blind for dealing more imaginatively with the problem of information.

Under this heading, too, one should consider the existence or formation of special interest groups by the blind themselves or by the blind in association with others. At present there is a most remarkable attitude by the blind Establishment towards such groups, whether formed at local or national level. Yet in every other sphere of the life of the community it is precisely the activity of groups of this kind which enliven and enrich the life of the community. It is surely through groups of this kind that information can be gathered, disseminated and exchanged - it is surely for a minority group within a larger grouping the only way in which to achieve effective participation by exerting a measure of informed pressure. There, of course, is the rub and it brings me right back to the end of the first paragraph in this section: for pressure to be effective in the long run it has to be well informed.

7. PARTICIPATION

Repeatedly throughout this paper the concept of participation has come up. On the wider stage of society as a whole this has become one of the burning issues of the day. In the last One hundred years or so we have changed from being largely a society of those who produce for the benefit of a small number who consumed to a society in which the distinction between consumer and producer become more and more difficult to maintain. This is one of the reasons for an increasing demand by all sections of the community to have a greater say in the making of decisions which may affect any given section and in turn each one of us. It is yet another measure of the progress of the blind population that here too demands for effective participation are increasing.

There is of course already a measure of participation, largely at the consultative levels, between those who provide and those who make use of the services for the blind. But there is as yet very little beyond the consultative stage as distinct from the planning and decision making stages. Now in the past there have been several classic instances in which technological progress made in the field of blindness has proved of benefit to the rest of the community: it would be a splendid thing if, within the setting of services for the blind, an example could be set in the sphere of effective participation.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have listed a number of points as a contribution to the discussion about services for the blind in the seventies. The main theme of these points is the provision of a corps of specialists by the voluntary side to complement and supplement the more general services provided by the statutory side. To justify this I have outlined the case for considering at least some of the needs of the blind as special and unique, and have stressed in particular the need for an improved information system with quick access. Yet another line of argument deals with the distinction between welfare and rehabilitation and the suggestion that the voluntary side might in future concentrate on rehabilitation rather than on welfare activities.

Throughout this paper the concept of effective participation has been stressed and it is suggested that this might be yet another sphere in which progress made within the context of services for the blind might set an example to the rest of the community.

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